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1962 Sino-Indian war: Nehru's speech still hurts Assam

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TEZPUR (ASSAM): Fifty years after the 1962 Sino-Indian war, former prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru's role in it is still debated in Assam. After Nehru's speech on All India Radio (AIR) following the fall of Bomdila to the Chinese, many in Assam's Tezpur felt he was not concerned about the Brahmaputra Valley. Some veteran Congressmen though believe the people of Assam misunderstood Nehru.

In his address to the nation on AIR on November 20, 1962, Nehru said, "Huge Chinese armies have been marching in the northern part of NEFA. We have had reverses at Walong, Se La and today Bomdila, a small town in NEFA, has also fallen. We shall not rest till the invader goes out of India or is pushed out. I want to make that clear to all of you, and, especially our countrymen in Assam, to whom our heart goes out at this moment."
Atul Saikia (77), a resident of Dekargaon in Tezpur, said, "Assam was almost given away to China when Jawaharlal Nehru, in his speech after the capture of Bomdila, announced 'my heart goes out to the people of Assam' on the radio."

The speech changed Saikia's perception of New Delhi. "I strongly feel Assam would not have got that much of importance from the Centre had the India-China war not taken place," said Saikia.
Veteran Congress leader Bedabrata Barua said Nehru was almost weeping when he spoke after the capture of Bomdila. "I remember Nehru saying 'my heart goes out to the people of Assam' almost in a choked voice. But I was very confident that the Chinese would not enter Assam. Had they attacked Assam, the course of the war would have taken a different turn. Possibly, other countries would have come to India's aid to stop the marauding Chinese soldiers," said Barua.

Saikia's Dekargaon home is about 43 km from the border town of Bhalukpung in Arunachal Pradesh and the road that leads to the McMahon Line in Tawang. He is still not convinced with the interpretation of Congressmen like Barua.

Saikia, a local panchayat member, said, "Even after five decades, I still remember how people felt let down by New Delhi."

Nalini Deka, a retired school teacher in Tezpur, said, "I was very young then. Someone explained to me Nehru's speech. I realized if the prime minister of the country was so helpless, how could the common people withstand an attack by the Chinese? We were left in the lurch after the speech."

After Nehru's speech was broadcast, people in Tezpur became hysteric. "They began fleeing. There was chaos everywhere," said Pranab Sinha (71) of Tezpur.